

2. **NUCLEAR CRISIS: Japan disaster sparks message battle in Washington** (03/16/2011)

Anne C. Mulkern, E&E reporter

Supporters of nuclear energy say it comes down to this: Accept the risk of rare nuclear accidents or face the possibility of catastrophic climate change.

The argument echoed across Washington, D.C., as nuclear advocates sought to counter critics in the wake of calamity at Japan's Fukushima Daiichi power plant.

"If we close down our nuclear reactors or do not build nuclear reactors, the implications for climate change would be staggering," said Charles Ebinger, director of the Energy Security Initiative at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank. "China alone, if China were to abandon its very ambitious nuclear program, and India as well, they would have no near-term alternative to coal, and that would be devastating for the atmosphere."

Nuclear supporters and opponents worked to frame the argument over nuclear's future as Congress members weighed in on how the catastrophe in Japan could affect U.S. nuclear development.

Yesterday, Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), ranking member of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, said that the disaster should be kept in context and that "the nuclear technology that has been powering that country for 40 years has gone through an incredible act of God with the earthquakes and the tsunami."

Rep. Ed Whitfield (R-Ky.), chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee's Energy and Power Subcommittee, said, "We're going to continue to see support for nuclear energy unless there's some evidence that there's just something terribly wrong with the safety, which I don't think that's the case." Said Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), "This is a time to be cautious. I think we have to look at it again and again."

Industry trade group Nuclear Energy Institute kept its lobbying strategy private and did not respond to multiple requests for interviews. During a conference call with reporters, NEI Senior Vice President and Chief Nuclear Officer Anthony Pietrangolo said that it is "unwise to make policy decisions in the middle of the event" and that "people need to calm down." The industry will apply lessons learned from Japan, he said, adding that there is "plenty of time to make policy decisions going forward."

Analysts predicted that any setback for the industry would be short-term. Countries like China, India and South Korea will continue building nuclear plants, Ebinger said. In Indonesia and Malaysia, "it will probably slow if not stop things for a while," he said. But the United Kingdom likely will proceed with a plan to build 10 plants, he said.

In the United States, the nuclear industry could face new resistance, Ebinger and other analysts said. But already there were major challenges, they said.

"They are very expensive, very large, and very few people actually want to build them," said Richard Caperton, energy policy analyst at Center for American Progress.

And the low price of natural gas makes the cost of building nuclear even more restrictive, said David Conover, senior vice president at Bipartisan Policy Center, who worked in the George W. Bush Energy Department Office of Policy and International Affairs.

"The fact that we now have renewed safety concerns that will lead to increased scrutiny of existing and proposed plants added to the already challenging cost issues," Conover said in an e-mail. "Compounded by competition from cheap natural gas, and the demise of climate legislation as a potential driver for clean energy investment, one would have to conclude that the near term looks pretty austere for new nuclear build, but probably would have anyway."

There has been only limited progress toward one potential new plant in Georgia despite loan guarantees authorized by the 2005 energy bill, Ebinger said.

"So we do not have a renaissance in the country, and I don't think we were going to have a renaissance, primarily because of the cost," Ebinger said.

Shaping strategies

Prior to the Japan quake and tsunami, moderate groups wanting clean energy legislation held out nuclear power as a politically palatable option for reducing carbon emissions.

Post-Japan, there should not be a rush to disregard nuclear, said Third Way Clean Energy Program Director Josh Freed.

"We have to put the crisis in Japan in the broader context of the risks that we incur every day with fossil fuels," Freed said. "We live day in and day out with fine particulate air pollution with accidents at coal mines" and other problems related to coal and natural gas use, he said.

"The choices we've been debating and will continue to be debating are: What energy sources do we have available to reduce those risks?" Freed said.

Comparing environmental and safety costs gives nuclear an advantage over other fuel sources, Caperton said.

"Some studies indicate that on a per-kilowatt-hour basis, the electricity from coal-fired generation is 4,000 times more deadly than electricity from nuclear generation, primarily because of harmful emissions and premature deaths," Caperton said. For the industry, he said, "Using numbers like that to put the nuclear threat in perspective may be advantageous."

While the carbon emissions of natural gas are lower than those of coal, "natural gas carbon dioxide emissions are still extremely high," Caperton said, "and ultimately, we need to use power sources that are lower-carbon."

In addition to that argument, the nuclear industry needs to reassure people, Caperton said, "that we can withstand not just what happened in Japan but also that we can withstand other threats to our reactors," including extreme weather.

"Unfortunately, there may be instances where they have to take power plants offline" if an investigation proves them unsafe, Caperton added.

Environmental groups, however, rejected that there should be a choice between the risks of nuclear and those of climate change.

"There are faster, safer and much more cost-effective ways to tackle climate change than building a fleet of nuclear reactors," said Elliott Negin, Union of Concerned Scientists spokesman.

The Union of Concerned Scientists advocates a combination of energy efficiency, renewable energy and natural gas as a bridge fuel. The group called for renewed scrutiny of nuclear power.

"Given this accident, what we're saying is that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission needs to re-evaluate the safety and security requirements that it places on the nuclear fleet that's currently in operation in the U.S.," Negin said.

"We've been talking about this for 40 years," Negin added. "Historically, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has been a cheerleader for the industry instead of being a watchdog. There's been lax oversight for a long time."

Congress also has been friendly to the industry, he said, sometimes thwarting tougher oversight by NRC.

'Bigger audience'

Nuclear critics see new opportunity to make their points.

Friends of the Earth has opposed nuclear for years, it says, and now is reminding people of its concerns.

"I don't know that what we're saying is going to be different, but there's going to be a bigger audience," said Nick Berning, spokesman for Friends of the Earth. "People are paying attention to this issue in a way that they haven't in a long time."

A number of reactors similar to the one in Japan are up for relicensing, Berning said, adding "all of these requests should be viewed with great skepticism in light of this."

"We're going to continue to do what we've always done, which is to talk about why nuclear power doesn't make sense," Berning added.

Union of Concerned Scientists noted that crises can be catalysts.

"It unfortunately takes a disaster for people to pay attention; that's just human nature," Negin said.

Lane argued that industry needs to make people take a broader view.

"They've got to convince people not just to look at nuclear issues in isolation but look it as part of the energy mix and realize the implications for forgoing nuclear and what it means for dependence on the remaining fuels," Lane said. "Yes, nuclear has risks, but so do the others."

Reporters Emily Yehle, Hannah Northey and Jeremy P. Jacobs contributed.

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